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ABSTRACT

That writing promotes learning hardly needs demonstration, despite the fact that actual empirical studies on the premise have been inconclusive. What would further the effectiveness of writing across the curriculum programs is not more empirical studies but rather an assessment of the practices and exercises that further writing as a learning tool. While empirical studies concentrate on how writing improves recall abilities, common sense suggests that writing's most important benefits are those in the area of logical thinking. It exposes gaps in the writer's reasoning; it reveals how incomplete his or her understanding of an issue may be; and it encourages additional exploration and understanding of the writing topic. Furthermore, the writing process usually results in an internal dialogue, wherein the writer questions his or her own assumptions and conclusions in anticipation of the responses of his or her audience. If this internal process eludes some students, however, it could be because they have not been modeled in the classroom. Some forms of reasoning, such as explicating a poem or analyzing a speech or interpreting the results of an empirical study, cannot be learned solely through writing; the process needs to be set in motion prior to the writing process. Those who teach in writing across the curriculum programs must give consideration to the types of classroom practices that will facilitate the kind of inner dialogue that makes writing a learning experience. (TB)

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Writing-to-Learn as a Rationale for Writing Across the Curriculum

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Writing-to-Learn as a Rationale for WAC
CCCC, 1994

Probably the most commonly cited rationale for instituting writing-across-the-curriculum programs is the assertion that writing can promote various types of learning. This is a commonplace in our field, and in education in general. It's taken on the empirical status of common sense. Of course writing enhances learning. Anyone who would say otherwise would have the burden of proof placed on them.

But there's a problem with this rationale. Researchers studying the relationship between writing and learning have been unable to come up with a solid base of evidence to support the assertion that writing promotes learning. In 1987, Penrose declared that the results of the available writing-to-learn studies were mixed, at best. In 1989, Newell and Winograd claimed that there was "at present only a slender empirical base" from which to make generalizations about the relationships between writing and learning (p. 196). In 1991, Schumacher and Nash said that the writing-to-learn research "has resulted in a complex and somewhat confusing pattern of findings" (p. 68). And in 1993, Ackerman argued that the writing-to-learn research had still not yet provided "the long-sought empirical validation of writing as a mode of learning" (p. 334, the abstract).

These are just a few examples of what has become a commonplace in the literature on writing-to-learn--the complaint that our assumption that writing promotes learning has still not been empirically demonstrated. Yet none of these critics say that we should entirely back off of our assertions that instructors should use writing to enhance learning. In other words, even though the research results have been inconclusive, we still believe that writing can promote learning. Our own experiences as teachers and as writers, our conversations with our colleagues and students, the things we hear, see, and read every day tell us that writing about a question, a problem, or an issue can help us clarify our thinking about the issue, or help us define the problem. The idea that writing promotes learning and reasoning is still common sense. Why, then, have researchers had such a difficult time establishing a clear link between writing and learning?

In their 1991 RTE article, Schumacher and Nash argue that the confusing pattern in the research results stems partly from the types of learning that researchers have expected writing to influence. For instance, while several writing-to-learn researchers have looked at the effects of writing on the recall of expository text, Schumacher and Nash argue that there is no clearly expressed theoretical reason to expect writing to enhance this type of learning. In other words, writing can promote learning, just not *that* type of learning--not simple recall.

In his 1993 *Written Communication* article, Ackerman echoes this criticism of the writing-to-learn research, and goes on to say that writing and learning activities may be confounded by "cultural and institutional pressures" (p. 351), and that, ultimately, the success or failure of writing-to-learn activities will be largely determined by "institutional, disciplinary, and cultural practices" (p. 361). Other writers have pointed out other factors that may confound the research results--including variables such as the type of writing task that's being used, the student's representation of the task, the topic that's being written about, the experience and ability of the writer, the types of text that are being studied, and the amount of time spent writing.

Besides all the variables that researchers need to deal with, it's also true that both *writing* and *learning* are complicated and ill-defined concepts. So of course, the relationships between these concepts are not going to be easy to pin down. It is also true that both writing and learning inevitably take place within some sort of institutional and social context, and there are an almost endless number of ways in which the context can influence the outcome of writing and learning activities. So where does this leave us as researchers and as advocates of the notion of using writing to enhance learning?

Schumacher and Nash suggest that we go back to the empirical drawing board and try to develop hypotheses about the writing-learning relationship that are more theoretically informed. They draw from cognitive learning theory to argue that writing may enhance learning by restructuring the writer's knowledge, creating new knowledge structures that we can then record and describe through cognitive research. However, the conclusion that writing affects learning because it reorganizes knowledge seems incomplete. Surely there

is more going on in writing than reorganizing bits of knowledge. I think that the role of writing in learning is something more than that.

I don't think there is any one thing we can say about writing that will capture its effects on the learning process. I think there are lots of ways in which we can talk about the role of writing in learning. For instance, we can talk about how writing provides an external memory. When I use writing to help me reason out the implications of an issue, or to explicate a story, I can take more viewpoints into account, use more information of various types, because I don't have to keep all of it in my head, all at the same time, during the entire time that I'm working toward my conclusion. This is an obvious point, and not very original, but it surely isn't trivial. In itself, I think that looking at writing as external memory can potentially explain much of the power that writing has on the learning process. And I think that cognitive theory and cognitive research can help us understand how this process works.

One implication of this obvious and not very original observation is that, because writing provides an external memory, and because this lets us look at and compare more aspects of an issue than we normally would, writing may help us notice problems with our reasoning that we might not notice if we didn't write. For instance, while writing down our thoughts, we may notice that we've been making inductive leaps that aren't warranted. Or that there's information that we didn't take into account when we formed our conclusion. Or perhaps we can notice, for the first time, where the gaps are in our knowledge.

As I wrote this paragraph, I remembered comments that I've heard from my students as they write about complex social issues for their argumentation papers. We start the papers in class, in the computer lab, and sometime during class, inevitably, some students will come up to me and say things like:

> "This issue is more complicated than I thought."
>
> "I don't understand this issue as well as I thought I did."

Is this learning? Is finding out what you don't know or don't understand learning? Sure it is. Even if the process stopped here--with a new understanding of one's limitations in the face of a complex issue--I would argue that some real learning has occurred. But this isn't

the end of the process. These students did not make these comments because they thought I would find them interesting. They didn't say, "The issue is more complicated than I thought. Isn't that interesting?" They said, "The issue is more complicated than I thought. I need more time." At this point, writing had helped the students identify a problem with their nice orderly, linear plan for completing the assignment. Now they needed to address the problem.

A powerful effect of writing, then, is that it can help writers identify problems in their understanding or gaps in their knowledge. This opens up the potential for new learning about the topic being written about. But there are obviously pitfalls in this process. For instance, some students say things like, "I don't understand this issue as well as I thought I did. Can I pick another topic?" In other words, a topic that I already understand--that I won't have to think much about or do a lot of research on. If the problems that writing unearths are ignored or avoided instead of addressed, it may be that the potential for learning that writing affords gets undercut and doesn't become fully realized.

Other students don't seem to see the gaps in their knowledge, even though the gaps are clearly there when they turn in their drafts. They don't see, through writing, that they don't understand the issue, though it may be clear to me as a reader that they don't. And they don't see the unwarranted (and unwarrantable) inferential leaps that jump out at any careful reader of their papers. Why not? Why is it that writing doesn't seem to help these students in these situations?

When people talk about how writing can enhance learning, they often use words such as "dialogue" and "dialectic." The assumption seems to be that writing initiates a sort of internal dialogue in which the writer looks at an issue from various perspectives and therefore comes to a better understanding of the issue. For instance, in his 1989 dissertation, McGinley describes the "internal dialogue" that he sees going on as a learner engages in self-initiated reading and writing activities in order to explore a topic. This process of establishing and making use of an internal dialogue can be a powerful mode of learning. Why, then, does this so often not seem to happen?

From a sociocognitive perspective, internal dialogues take on the form of social dialogues that the learner has been exposed to. It could be that the dialogues that students sometimes engage in while writing--to put it another way, the reasoning processes that they bring to bear on the task--are simply inadequate or inappropriate for what they're being asked to do. Specific forms of reasoning--for instance, explicating a poem or analyzing a speech or interpreting the results of an empirical study--cannot be learned solely through writing. Writing can be a powerful way for students to practice and refine these skills, but they need to see the process first and have its parameters defined. This may involve reading models, but should also involve some sort of interaction in which the writer can see the dynamic process evolving. This may happen through a reading/writiing dialogue, but it will more likely happen in face-to-face interactions in the classroom. Until the writer has internalized the appropriate procedural knowledge, only two results are possible. First, the writer may realize that she lacks the appropriate knowledge, and will go back to the instructor for clarification. More likely, the writer will fall back on a default mode--probably one of finding some facts and plugging them into a set framework. The writing will be done, but it's doubtful that any real learning will occur.

There is another way that writing can be seen as dialogic. Writers don't just wrestle with the forms of reasoning that they've learned. They also anticipate the reactions of their readers, perhaps playing the part of critical readers as they continually re-examine their own evolving text. When a writer has a clear concept of a critical audience in mind, is actively thinking about the audience's assumptions and attitudes while writing, and when the writer really cares about influencing the audience, then this dialogue between the writer and her represented audience can be a powerful mode of learning. But we need to remember that the type of inner dialogue that takes place is dependent on the writer's representation of the audience. If the imagined reader is one who is comfortable with contradiction or unwilling to challenge the writer's assertions, then there may be a very stilted internal dialogue--one that will not allow very much real learning to occur. I can crank out a reasonably lucid essay on any number of topics without learning any measurable amount--if I assume at the outset that the audience will probably agree with my conclusion and, since they like my conclusion, they won't bother analyzing my arguments.

Another possibility is that the writer has no clear conception of an audience at all. It may be that the kind of unengaging, seemingly purposeless writing that students are often asked to do in school do not prompt them to even think about audience reactions.

In short, writing enables learning, but it does not guarantee it. While this has been said many times before, and it is obvious on the face of it, writing-to-learn researchers are just now starting to take it into account when designing their studies. What is important is that we try to zero in on some of the factors that influence the success or failure of writing-to-learn activities. I have pointed to just a few of these factors. There are many more, and the interrelationships among them are complex.

Now I suppose I should talk about the title of my talk--Writing to Learn as a Rationale for WAC. When I first started on this project, I was concerned about the problem that I identified at the beginning of my talk--that we proponents of WAC offer writing-to-learn as a rationale for WAC, but that we don't have the empirical support to back up our words--the "empirical validation" that Ackerman mentions. However, after six months on the job as a WAC director, I've become convinced that the kind of validation I was looking for is simply not needed. Many of the faculty members I talk to are already convinced that writing can promote learning. This is a commonsense notion, not just in the writing community, but in the larger educational community. And anyone who says that they don't think writing offers any pedagogical benefits--well, they wouldn't be convinced by my citing a few studies, anyway.

My colleagues don't want to hear about experimental support for using writing. They want, first, a plausible story, second, some practical ideas for implementation, and third, some noticeable results within a reasonable amount of time.

We already have lots of plausible stories for how writing may promote learning--so many that we are continually surprised at how difficult it is to provide empirical support. In terms of practical ideas, we have lots of those, too. We can talk about journals and microthemes and peer review and sequenced assignments, and dozens of other procedures that creative teachers have developed for incorporating writing into their content-area classrooms.

Results in the classroom will supply their own rationale. But in order to get results, we need to concentrate our efforts on finding out how to best incorporate writing within a variety of classroom contexts. We need to be able to discuss the types of classroom practices that will facilitate the kind of inner dialogue that makes writing a learning experience. We need to continue to look at the writing-to-learn process, focusing on the following questions:

1. What are some effective ways that writers can use the external memory that writing provides in order to explore and learn about a topic?

2. What sorts of internal dialogues do we want students to engage in?

3. What sorts of instructional processes can make it more likely that writers will engage in effective and useful dialogues with their critical selves and with their imagined readers?